Hughes Aide Says Nixon Was Present at Gift Talk

11/7/74

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An aide to billionaire Howard Hughes has told the Senate select Watergate committee that Richard Nixon was present at a 1968 meeting when a request was made for a Nixon campaign contribution from Hughes, sources close to the committee said yesterday.

According to one source, Richard Danner, a Hughes aide, testified under oath to the Senate committee staff in a closed session that he could not recall whether the request for money from Hughes came from Mr. Nixon himself or from his friend, Charles G. (Bebe) Rebozo, who also was present.

Another source, familiar with Danner's secret testimony, said he could not recall any statement by Danner that Mr. Nixon personally asked for the contribution. "Danner's statement that Nixon was present at the discussion would be closer to it," this source said.

Danner's testimony in the closed committee session last month, as described by the Senate committee sources, appears to conflict with earlier sworn statements by Danner and may also conflict with statements made by President Nixon at an Oct. 26 press conference.

The committee has been investigating a $100,000 cash contribution made by Hughes, through Danner, to Rebozo. The payments were made in two installments of $50,000 each in 1969 and 1970. Conflicting accounts also have been given concerning the purpose of the contributions.

Rebozo has told the Senate committee in secret testimony that he kept the money in a

See COMMITTEE, A6, Col. 1

Nixon Said Present At Hughes Gift Talk

COMMITTEE, From A1

safe deposit box for three years before returning it to a Hughes emissary in June, 1973.

Danner, who joined the Hughes organization in 1969 and who now manages the Hughes' Sands Hotel in Las Vegas, issued a statement through a spokesman last night denying reports that Mr. Nixon had asked for a contribution in 1968. In his statement, Danner listed the following "facts."

"Although he may have been present at some discussions about fund-raising in 1968, Mr. Nixon did not ask me to raise $50,000 or any other amount from Mr. Hughes or anyone else.

"I did work with Mr. Rebozo on fund-raising matters, and that early activity was before I joined the Hughes organization.

"I did deliver two contributions of $50,000 each for the 1970 congressional campaign. That money was turned over to Mr. Rebozo and was later returned by him for reasons he considered valid.

"No special favors were ever asked or received in connection with these political contributions. We did not invent the system of political fund-raising, and there was nothing wrong, morally or legally, in our activities.

Senate committee sources described Danner as being uncertain about several details of the 1968 meeting with Nixon and Rebozo, including the time and location of the session. One committee source said that he did not think the 1968 discussion of the contribution "was a lengthy and long discussion. It did not take long to say what was said."

In a sworn deposition given by Danner last September as part of a lawsuit involving the Hughes financial empire, Danner told of a meeting during the 1968 campaign in which he, Rebozo and a Hughes lawyer discussed "the possibility of the Hughes organization making a contribution to the Nixon campaign."

Later, Danner said in the deposition, word came back to him that "$50,000 had been agreed upon." Danner's deposition does not mention Mr. Nixon's presence at that meeting.

In his Oct. 26 press conference, President Nixon said he adhered to strict personal rules for the handling of political contributions. "I have refused always to accept contributions myself," Mr. Nixon said. "I have refused to have any discussion of contributions."

Mr. Nixon said at that press conference that the $100,000 money was contributed by Hughes for Nixon's 1972 reelection campaign.

Danner, in his September deposition, said that the $100,000 was to be used for the 1970 congressional campaign.

Robert A. Maheu, a former Hughes aide who once ran Hughes' Nevada operation, said in another sworn deposition, made in July, 1973, that the first $50,000 was intended for Mr. Nixon's 1968 campaign. Maheu, however, said the second $50,000 was related to an antitrust problem that Hughes was having with the Justice Department.

After the second $50,000 was delivered to Rebozo in August, 1970, at the Western White House in San Clemente, Maheu said, then Attorney General John N. Mitchell granted a request, over the antitrust division's objections, for Hughes to acquire the Dunes Hotel in Las Vegas. The transaction fell through, however.